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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes the evolution of a school-based planning model that accommodates independent approaches to School District of Philadelphia goals. The description centers on key strategic planning decisions made during a 6-year period and three components of the planning model: the organizational monitoring and feedback system; organizational cybernetics; and organizational strains created by the tensions among policies, procedures, and personnel. The model provided a framework for each of Philadelphia's 260 schools to work toward goals appropriate to their own unique circumstances. The model is significant not only because it provides schools autonomy in a tight policy framework, but because it has served to coordinate instructional services delivery. (JAM)

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# SCHOOL SITE STRATEGIC PLANNING TO IMPROVE DISTRICT PERFORMANCE

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## SCHOOL SITE STRATEGIC PLANNING TO IMPROVE DISTRICT PERFORMANCE

This paper describes the evolution of a school-based planning model which accommodates independent approaches to district goals. During the past six years the School District of Philadelphia has adopted a set of policies which standardize curriculum, marking, promotion, and testing. In this context the school planning model provides a framework for each of 260 schools in the Philadelphia system to work towards goals/objectives appropriate to its unique circumstances. On their part the Board and central administration acknowledge the autonomy of each faculty and school community, working within this framework, and assume that school district performance on a range of indicators will improve as individual schools work on their most pressing issues.

The model developed in Philadelphia is significant not only because it provides autonomy in a tight policy framework, but also because it has served to coordinate instructional support service delivery. School plans are read by curriculum, special education, desegregation, Chapter I and early childhood staff who in turn plan school support based on the priorities set forward in each plan. (If, for example, eight elementary schools in one sub-district indicate that their grade 4-6 students are having problems with the geometry strand of the math curriculum, then the mathematics supervisor designs materials and workshops in response to that need.)

The research on school site planning has been conducted through a combination of participant/observer and field study methods while the author has been both a principal and cabinet-level administrator in the district. Materials provided to principals and teachers during each of the past six cycles have been reviewed to determine how the planning process has been modified from year to year. Critiques and recommendations provided by district superintendents, principals and teachers over the six-year period provide documentation of how each group has perceived the process and worked to improve its utility. Review of these critiques indicates that school planning has moved during the six-year period from being a nuisance and *pro forma* activity to a process principals and teachers value and want to improve.

**Key decisions** made during the six year period include:

1. Having a good consultant in the initial design state who helped district superintendents break through normative barriers (e.g., introducing the concept of strategic planning for schools).

2. Making these **sub-district superintendents**, not the central office, **the focal actors** in the process. For them the new planning process has provided a meaningful, rational way to supervise 35 schools each, an "impossible" span of control. Central office does not participate in plan design, review or evaluation. Modifications in the process are made on the recommendations of the district superintendents.

3. Deciding in the first year to cooperate in the State's "Long Range School Improvement Planning" cycle. LRSIP provided **external authority** to motivate administrators and insure cooperation. It also provided a small grant which could be used as "venture capital" to pay for planning sessions and materials.

4. Permitting **each school** to have **separate goals and objectives** within the framework of the Superintendent's agenda. As a result, schools have been able to focus on priorities determined by their faculties, not ones centrally mandated. (This situation provided an interesting admixture to the recentralization thrust of most of the Superintendent's initiatives.)

5. **Providing time** during the work day for faculties to work on school plans. Previous school plans were expected to be done within the normal faculty meeting structure. Committing 1/2 days with early dismissals and whole professional days to school planning was a recommendation from district superintendents, supported by the Superintendent and the Board.

6. Determining that there would be **only one school plan** meant that schools were not being asked to develop several separate plans by different divisions each year. Instead, all support divisions (i.e., Special Education, Early Childhood, Desegregation) agreed to work at the direction of district superintendents in helping schools plan and in the review process. As a result, school planning has become an integrating activity with school priorities, not division priorities, at the core.

7. Because in the first year a new testing program was being developed, test scores could not be used as a measure of school performance. Instead, schools had to choose **local performance measures** from school-generated data. This allowed schools to stipulate **multiple performance indicators** closely tied to their own goals and objectives, and to avoid preoccupation with system-wide accountability standards in the early stages of the improvement effort. The concept of multiple indicators/measures of performance has now become deeply imbedded in school planning and evaluation, as has a **quarterly performance monitoring system**.

8. Developing an annual school and system "profile" book which makes **public** a variety of student performance and demographic data and school climate information. Parents, school faculties, administration and the community now have **access to information** which supports constructive criticism, planning, and problem solving.

9. Given a wide variety of initiatives undertaken by the Superintendent to improve system performance and a prevailing state of anarchy when she took office, school improvement planning has allowed principals and teachers to see a **focus and purpose** in the organization's activities while retaining a sense of local control.

10. Staff and support divisions, including the central planning office, have **respected the roles and functions of line officers**, particularly district superintendents and principals, in developing a meaningful school planning process.

11. **Recommendations** from principals and teachers for improving the planning process have been **solicited and responded to**. For example, in the most recent cycle, principals recommended a shift to a three-year time-frame with annual updates, rather than preparation of new plans each year. And the budget and requisition cycles have been tied to the planning cycle.

12. Finally the Superintendent knowingly assumed an **extended time-frame** (at least five years) before demonstrable improvement in student achievement might reasonably be expected. She and her senior staff have also been willing to **keep the process a formative and supportive one**; schools are not blamed for poor performance but rather provided additional support.

Sometimes serendipity provides the best confirmation that things are working the way they're supposed to. A Philadelphia classroom teacher (who was unaware of my role in developing the district's school planning process) was enrolled in an organizational theory course I was teaching last Fall (1988). As part of a journal requirement for the course she wrote:

The School District of Philadelphia has newly implemented a three year school improvement plan. Each school, in keeping with the Standardized Curriculum, looks at a variety of respected academic indicators of student progress. Each school then chooses an area of weakness in which remediation and growth will occur. Based on this research, goals, objectives and indicators are defined and combined with an action plan to realize these goals and objectives. Reflection on action meetings strategically placed at critical points help to evaluate reflection on action and reflection in action as well as the goals. Reframing may or may not be indicated.

Central to the implementation of the plan is Lorsch's concept of "producing managers." Since the school improvement plan is composed of many units, teachers are given the additional responsibility of being "producing managers." Usually chosen by principal or staff, these managers guide their colleagues along a fine line between professional autonomy and commitment to the goal of the school improvement plan. The producing managers keep a finger on the pulse of the plan and by using people skills, respect for colleagues, integrity, questioning, and testing, bring the process to fruition thereby fulfilling the initial challenge (Nigro, 1988).

As might be deduced from her remarks, we had been reading Donald Schon (1984) and Jay Lorsch (1987); she had been asked to make sense of the readings in terms of her own work experience. I don't pretend that things are working as well at every school; on the other hand, her school and its principal are not considered paragons by central office cognoscenti. But the passage does indicate that two key components are in place - using performance data to drive planning and teacher involvement in the process.

Although it would be inappropriate to claim that the school planning process is the cause of **improved system performance**, it is appropriate to ask whether system performance has improved during the past six years. In terms of the student performance indicators for which consistent data are available, the answer is a qualified "yes." **Standardized test scores** (CTBS-U) have increased in reading and math in all grades, 1 - 8, each year for the past five years. Similarly, **SATs** have shown small but consistent annual increases in both verbal and math scores. **College admissions** have held steady in the face of declining federal support for low-income students. The **dropout rate** has remained steady as has **attendance**. The **grade retention rate** initially increased with the implementation of a promotion policy in 1984-85 but is now steady. **Suspensions** have declined as have **special education placements**.

## DISCUSSION:

There are at least three elements of the Philadelphia planning model which deserve comment. One is the monitoring and feedback system, using multiple indicators, that resembles that originally developed by Demming and credited for much of the Japanese economic success. Performance data are regularly and systematically fed back to production workers (i.e., teachers) who are expected to make sense of the information and take whatever action is required to improve performance. The assumption is that the intelligence of the work force and their first hand knowledge of production problems make them and not senior management the best locus for production planning.



In his discussion of organizations as brains, Morgan (1986) uses concepts from cybernetics to elucidate this approach. In Morgan's view the most developed organizations have the capacity to learn and to learn to learn; they "break free of bureaucratic controls" and "deal with uncertain and complex problems that go well beyond the capacities of any single individual" (p.107). Without getting caught up in an exegesis of Morgan, what I find encouraging about the Philadelphia planning model is that it (unknowingly) has incorporated many of the elements of the "learning organization" Morgan describes.

Which leads to a final point. In commenting on the replication by Kottkamp et al of his Dade County study of teachers, Lortie (1986) argues that apparent increases in teacher dissatisfaction between 1964 and 1984 are attributable to "increasing tension between the qualifications and self-images of teachers in large school districts, their position in the formal system of governance, and their ability to make firm decisions in matters related to their own classrooms and students" (p.571). This "structural strain" results in part from the tensions between increased policy and procedural requirements and diminished autonomy, on the one hand, and a better educated and more experienced work force on the other.

In Lortie's view "teachers should secure for themselves more explicitly authorized participation in a variety of organizational and occupational affairs" (p.572). Only restructuring in this most fundamental sense is likely to bring about the sort of working conditions he sees as necessary and likely to restore teachers' satisfaction with their work and to attract competent younger teachers to the profession. My sense of the school planning process in Philadelphia is that it has been successful in initiating just this sort of restructuring.

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